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THE THUNDER BIRD.

BY REV. MYRON EELLS.

Among the strange links which bind together the numerous tribes of Western America is the myth of the Thunder Bird. The general idea among the Indians is that thunder is caused by an immense bird, whose size darkens the heavens, whose body is the thunder cloud, the flapping of whose wings causes the thunder, and the bolts of fire, which it sends out of its mouth to kill the whale for its food, are the lightning. The Makahs and some other tribes, however, invest the animal with a twofold character, human and bird-like. According to them the being is supposed to be a gigantic Indian, named in the dialects of the various coast tribes Kakaitch, T'hlu-kluts, and Tu-tutsh, the latter being the Nootkan name. He lives in the highest mountains and his food consists of whales. When he wants food he puts on a great garment, which is made of a bird's head, a pair of very large wings, and a feather covering for his body, and around his waist he ties the lightning fish, which slightly resembles the sea horse. This animal has a head as sharp as a knife, and a red tongue which makes the fire. He then flies forth, and when he sees a whale he darts the lightning fish into its body, which he then seizes and carries to his home. Occasionally, however, he strikes a tree and more seldom a man.

AUTHORITIES.

For our knowledge of this bird we are indebted to Dr. W. H. Dall, in the Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology for 1881-'2; Oregon, by John Dunn; Mr. James Deans, in the American Antiquarian for 1885; Bancroft's Native Races of the Pacific; Mr. W. H. Holmes, in the Transactions of this Society for 1882-'3; especially to Mr. J. G. Swan, in his Makah Indians, Haida Indians, and Three Years' Residence in Washington Territory; and to Dr. S. R. Riggs, in his Gospel among the Dakotas.

ORIGIN.

The origin of the bird, according to Mr. Swan, as given by the Chehalis and Chinook Indians is as follows: "Ages ago an old man

named Too-lux, or the south wind, while traveling north, met an old woman named Quoots-hooi, who was an ogress or giantess. He asked her for food, when she gave him a net, telling him that she had nothing to eat, and he must go and try to catch some fish. He accordingly dragged the net and succeeded in catching the grampus, or as the Indians called it, a little whale. This he was about to cut with his knife when the old woman cried out to him to take a sharp shell and not to cut the fish crossways, but split it down the back. Without giving heed to what she said, he cut the fish across the side and was about to take off a piece of blubber, but the fish immediately changed into an immense bird, that when flying completely obscured the sun, and the noise made by its wings shook the earth." They also add that this thunder bird flew to the north and lit on the top of the Saddleback Mountain near the Columbia river, where it laid a nest full of eggs. It was followed by the gaintess, who found the eggs; whereupon she began to break and eat them, and from these mankind, or at least the Chehalis and Chinook tribes, were produced. The thunder bird, called Hahness by those Indians, came back and, finding its nest destroyed, went to Toolux, the south wind, for redress, but neither of them could ever find the ogress, although they regularly went north every year.

THE CAUSE OF THUNDER.

As to the cause of thunder among these tribes, Mr. Swan says that when a young girl reaches womanhood she has to go through a process of purification which lasts a month. Among other customs at this time, if there is a southwest wind, with signs of rain, she must on no account go out of doors, else the southwest wind is so offended that he will send the thunder bird, who then by shaking his wings causes the thunder, and from whose eyes go forth the flashes of lightning. As far as Mr. Swan knew, every thunder-storm which occurred while he lived at Shoalwater Bay, three years, was attributed by the Indians to this cause—that is, to some girl disobeying this law.

SUPERSTITIONS.

The Indians are very superstitious in regard to this bird, believing that if they possess any feather, bone, or other part of it, or bone of the lightning fish, it will be of supernatural advantage to them. A Makah, who had been very sick, was reduced to a skeleton, and it was believed could not recover, yet he managed to crawl one day,

says Mr. Swan, to a brook near by, and while there he heard a rustling which so frightened him that he covered his face with his blanket. Peeping out he saw a raven near him, apparently trying to throw up something, and, according to the Indian, it did throw up a piece of bone about three inches long. The Indian secured this, believing it to be a bone of the thunder bird, and he was told by the Indian doctors that it was a medicine sent to him by his Tamahnous, or guardian spirit, to cure him. It was a fact that he did recover very quickly, perhaps through the effect of his imagining it to be such a bone and a strong medicine. It may also have been dropped there by the raven.

On one occasion, at a display of fire-works in Port Townsend, a number of rockets bursting showed fiery serpents. These the Indians believed belonged to the thunder bird, and offered large sums for pieces of the animal. They told Mr. Swan they would give two hundred dollars for a backbone of one.

A Quinaiet Indian once professed to have obtained a feather of one of these birds. He said he saw one of them light, and, creeping up softly, tied a buckskin string to one of its feathers and fastened the other end to a stump. When the bird flew away it left the feather, which was forty fathoms long. No other Indian saw it, for he was careful to keep it hid, but the possession of it was not questioned by the rest, as he was very successful in catching sea otter. According to the Makahs, one of the principal homes of the bird is on a mountain back of Clioquot, on Vancouver Island, where is a lake, and around it the Indians say are many bones of whales which the bird has killed.

THUNDER-BIRD PERFORMANCE.

Many of the Northwestern Indians have a performance in honor of this thunder bird, which is called the thunder-bird performance or "black tamahnous." It is said to have originated with the Nittinat Indians, according to the following legend as recorded by Mr. Swan: Two men had fallen in love with the same woman, but she would not give either the preference; whereupon they began to quarrel. But one of them, of more sense than the other, said: "Do not let us fight about that squaw. I will go and see the chief of the wolves and he will tell me what is to be done, but I cannot get to his house except by stratagem. Now they know we are at variance; so do you take me by the hair and drag me over these

sharp rocks, which are covered with barnacles, and I shall bleed and pretend to be dead, and the wolves will come and carry me away to their house." This was done; but when the wolves were ready to eat him he jumped up and astonished them by his boldness. The chief wolf was so much pleased with his bravery that he taught the man the mysteries of the thunder-bird performance. This, the most savage of all the Indian ceremonies, spread among all the Indians on Puget Sound, as well as to the north, the latter being the most savage in the performance of the ceremonies. Among other things, the performers hoot like owls, howl like wolves, paint their bodies black, especially the face, from which fact, in whole or in part, comes the English name "black tamahnous;" scarify their arms, legs, and sometimes the body, so as to bleed profusely, in remembrance of its origin; they make much noise, by firing guns, pound on drums to represent thunder, flash torches of pitchwood about as a representation of lightning, and whistle sharply in imitation of wind. The ceremonies, however, vary in different tribes, being much more savage and bloody in some than in others. Among the Makah five days are usually occupied in secret ceremonies, such as initiating candidates and other performances, before any public outdoor ceremonies take place. Among the Clallam the candidate for initiation is put into a kind of mesmeric sleep, which does not appear to be the case with the Makahs. Among the Clallam, however, the secret ceremonies are not always as long as among the Makahs, as the only time the writer ever witnessed the public exercises he was admitted very soon after they began, though there were secret ceremonies during the whole five days of the performance, in a house or behind a blanket. The affair closes with a general distribution of presents to the invited guests.

TRADITIONS.

Some traditions, especially of the Indians of British Columbia, make this thunder bird the Creator of man, if not of the world. Bancroft, in his "Native Races of the Pacific," says that one tradition of the origin of the Ahts makes them the direct descendants of Quaw-te-aht (their Creator or deity) and an immense bird that he married, the Great Thunder Bird, "To-toooh," the flapping of whose wings shook the hills with thunder (too-tah) and whose forked tongue sent the lightning across the sky.

Another tradition about Mt. Edgecomb, near Sitka, says that

Chethl—*i. e.*, the thunder or big lightning, who can swallow a whale without difficulty had a sister who climbed to the top of the mountain, and it opened and she fell through, leaving the great hole or crater open—as the world is a great flat plate, supported by a pillar which she guards from evil spirits. He now makes the thunder, and she hears him but never sees him.

The inland Tinne say that the world at first existed as a long ocean, frequented only by a great bird, the beating of whose wings was thunder and its glance lightning. It flew down and touched the water; whereupon the earth rose. It touched the earth and every living creature rose except the Tinne, who owe their origin to the Dog. It also gave to the Tinne a peculiar arrow, which they were to preserve with special care. They however failed to do so, but misappropriated the sacred shaft to common use; whereupon it flew away never to return, and the Golden Age of the Tinne was gone forever—an age when men lived until their throats were worn through with eating and their feet with walking.

Most of the natives of Alaska, except the Koniagas, believe in Yehl, the Raven, as their great Creator and the Creator of most things, and many traditions are told of him.

He is their great Deity, and he is also the author of thunder and lightning.

FIGURES.

Representations of the thunder bird are made on various articles by the Indians, to encourage them in bravery or to insure the protection of that bird, or the like. These, when fully drawn, usually consist of a great bird, somewhat hideous, with a large fish near it, but often only the head and eyes are pictured.

Mr. J. Deane, in the *American Antiquarian* for November, 1885, gives a picture of one on the front of an Indian chief's house at Alert Bay, Vancouver's Island, B. C. It is standing on the skeleton of a killer whale, whose bones he is supposed to have picked. Long ago, when these whales were abundant, the Indians were afraid of them when out in their frail canoes. Knowing the thunder bird to be their enemy, the Indians painted it on their houses, and even on their bodies, to secure its protection.

Dr. Dall, in the Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology for 1881-'2, gives an illustration of a mask of the bird form, obtained by Commodore Wilkes from the northwest coast of America,

symbolical of the thunder bird. The brows and bill are black, and the caruncle over the eyebrows, and the tongue within it, are red, and it is trimmed with swan skin having the down attached. The same writer gives another illustration of one obtained by Mr. Swan from Bella Bella, B. C. The paintings on it are quite different from those on the previous ones. This form of mask is quite common, as they are used by the Indians in their black tamahnous ceremonies.

Mr. Swan, in his Makah Indians, and also in his Haida Indians, gives pictures of this bird. In the former work (p. 9) the bird is standing on the whale, with the lightning fish near by. On pages 69, 70, he gives illustrations of seven masks used in the thunder-bird performance, five of which represent the human face, and the other two the heads of birds. In some of these the eyes and lower jaw are movable, so that by means of a string the eyes are made to roll about and the jaws to clatter in a hideous manner. Most of these are made by the Clioquot and Nittinat Indians, of British Columbia.

In the latter work Mr. Swan gives a representation of the thunder bird which was taken from the cape of a medicine man and which was brought from Sitka. The whale's head and lightning fish are here represented, but differing markedly from the other pictures referred to. Another picture is given, which was copied from the tattoo marks on a Haida Indian, and in this the thunder bird appears more in the form of a man, or half man and half bird, sitting down, but without the whale or lightning fish.

The writer has a stone war-club, also one of copper, and the handle of a third of bone. On the handles of all of these are the eyes of the thunder bird, to inspire the warrior with courage, and perhaps to protect him from the enemy. These clubs were obtained among the Clallam and Skokomish Indians. There is also on the Skokomish reservation a large stone, which weighs several tons, on which in bygone days have been made the eyes and nose of the thunder bird, the eyes being about six inches in diameter. The Indians formerly believed that when from any cause this stone was shaken it would cause rain. In his "Ten Years at Skokomish" (pp. 38-42) are given illustrations of three masks used by the Clallam Indians in the black tamahnous or thunder-bird performance, one of which represents the face of a bird, and another that of a hog. These were made by British Columbia Indians. They are generally painted quite fancifully. Sometimes the bird masks are

three feet long, and made so that the mouth will open very wide. Two illustrations are also given of rattles used in these ceremonies, one of which, and by far the most common one used, is in the shape of a bird.

EXTENT OF BELIEF IN THUNDER BIRD.

Mr. Swan says he has traced this belief from the Chinook Indians, at the mouth of the Columbia, to Sitka. Dr. Dall says it is known to extend as far north as Prince William's Sound, and Mr. E. W. Nelson declares that it exists among the Innuits on the shores of Behring Sea, and has proved his point by showing a carving of the bird from the Diomed Islands in Behring Strait. To the south, ancient Mexican mythology is said to have included a belief in such a creature. The Quiches of Guatemala, however, varied it so as to make Hurakan, the god of thunder, have a messenger bird, named Voc. The tradition of the inland Tinne, of British America, who live near the western shores of Hudson's Bay, two thousand miles from the Pacific coast, has been given. In the United States the tradition crosses the Rocky Mountains, for among the Dakotas, according to Mr. W. H. Holmes, the storm bird dwells in the upper air beyond human sight, and carries on its back a lake of fresh water. When it winks its eyes there is lightning, when it flaps its wings there is thunder, and when it shakes its plumage there is rain.

Dr. Riggs adds that this thunder god is a being of terrific proportions, in shape somewhat like a bird. As it flies, hid by the thick clouds, the lightnings flash forth and the thunder is its voice. There are four varieties, and they are male and female. One is black, with a long beak, and has four joints in each wing. Another is yellow, without any beak at all, and with wings like the first, but it has only six quills in each wing. The third is of a scarlet color, and has eight joints in each of its great wings. The fourth is blue and globular, with neither eyes nor ears. In place of the eyebrows are semicircular lines of lightning, from beneath which project downward two chains of lightning, zigzagging and diverging as they descend. Two plumes of soft down serve it for wings. The home of this family of gods is at the western extremity of the earth, on the summit of a beautiful mound, which is on a high mountain. The dwelling opens towards the four cardinal points, and at each doorway is stationed a watcher—a butterfly at the east,

a bear at the west, a reindeer at the north, and a beaver at the south. Each of these sentries is enveloped, except the head, in scarlet down, very soft and beautiful. These are gods of war, ever on the war-path. They are ruthless, cruel, and destructive, and a deadly enmity exists between them and the gods of the waters.

Thus we see that this singular belief, varied somewhat in different localities, yet based upon the same underlying idea, is widespread, and is found among tribes of very diverse languages.

ALTHOUGH much excellent work has already been done in the archæologic exploration of North America it is worthy of note that the period of systematic and thorough scientific investigation has only fairly begun. Enough of the scope and character of the whole field is now known, however, to begin to correlate and unify the results obtained by the individuals and institutions that already have entered the field, or that may aspire to enter it in the future.

There is a disposition in certain sections to forbid the intrusion of explorers from without, under the idea that the local agencies are in every way competent to prosecute the work with success. This spirit speaks well for the intelligence and enterprise of the communities concerned, but unless the latter are thoroughly organized to execute explorations, record data, and preserve the works of art this spirit of exclusion may work to the serious detriment of science. Lack of funds for thorough work in the field and for full publication of results, and especially the absence of means to secure valuable specimens from loss by fire and lack of care, are among the evils to be feared. Local museums are important agencies for securing and preserving relics, but only the fire-proof buildings, such as are now at the service of the great museums of the country, give assurance of the proper care of the materials of science and their preservation to future generations.